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2005 Finalist
Chandler Award

1st Place
Chandler Award Entry

Trustees propose allowing non-Christians on Board
Committee Recommends Changes to College Statement of Purpose, Trustee
Bylaws
October 20, 2004

On October 8, the Ad Hoc Committee of the Board of Trustees unanimously recommended to the entire Board changes to both the College’s Statement of Purpose and the Trustee Bylaws. The recommended changes would modify the Trustee religion requirement, allowing up to 20 percent of the board to be composed of non-Christian members.

Currently, the trustee bylaws state “all persons elected as Trustees shall be active members of a Christian church.”

Under the proposed changes, the new bylaws would read, “Historically, persons elected as Trustees have been active members of a Christian church. In order to preserve the religious heritage of Davidson College and in openness to and respect for the world’s various religious traditions; at all times at least eighty percent of the elected voting members of the Board of Trustees shall be active members of a Christian church.”

The process of the change
This recommendation marks a departure from the Board’s previous position that they had no intention of changing the religion requirement for Trustees.

The last time the Christian requirement was formally brought up with the Trustees was in 1996 when they discussed the possibility of removing or modifying the Christian requirement for those members of the Board elected by the Alumni Association. However, after deliberations the Board voted to maintain the requirement for Trustees.

The issue of the requirements did not officially come up again with the Trustees until last year, when the Board decided the topic of their annual retreat would explore “What it means to be a church-related college in the Reformed Tradition.”

“Last February we decided that the issue was current enough and we had a Board that had never engaged this particular topic so we decided to chose to examine this topic,” said President Bobby Vagt.

While the focus of the retreat was not specifically to discuss the Christian requirement, the retreat did allow the Trustees to explore the meaning of the Reformed Tradition in greater detail.

“The combination of presentations and extended small-group discussions at the retreat was the first opportunity in a long time for the Board as a whole to engage this important concept,” said Vagt.

Other Trustees also found the retreat helpful.

Rev. John Rogers ’63, a member of the Ad Hoc Committee said, “The conversation that came out of that retreat was very helpful. I had some questions about it [the requirement] but I was not unwilling to talk about it.”
Following the retreat, the Executive Committee of the Board appointed 10 trustees to serve on an Ad Hoc Committee that would study the possibility of changing or modifying the Trustee religion requirement.

Around the same time as the retreat, the Alumni Association unanimously expressed “its support for the Board of Trustees in its examination of the requirement that all trustees be ‘active members of a Christian Church’ and, as it relates to alumni-elected trustees, the Alumni Board encourages the Trustees to remove the Christian church membership requirement thereby opening service on the Board of Trustees to all alumni.”

While this decision by the Alumni association was not a decisive factor pressuring the Trustees to change, it did encourage the Board to take up the issue.

“The major impact of the Alumni Association request was to motivate us to focus on these issues sooner rather than later,” said John McCartney '74, Chairman of the Board of Trustees.

The Committee’s recommendation

The Ad Hoc Committee made three separate recommendations to the Board. First, that the College’s Statement of Purpose be revised in order to “retain those essential affirmations that have shaped the college, yet clarify and strengthen other portions that speak to current questions and issues.”

Second, that Article I of the trustee bylaws be changed in order to “strengthen the Board’s commitment to the Statement of Purpose.”

And third, that the Trustees support “the creation of an endowed chair in Reformed Theology.”

McCutney emphasized that the committee views all of these recommendations as bringing Davidson closer to the College’s traditions.

“These proposals are motivated by Trustee thinking about how we express what Davidson is and what we want Davidson to be, founded on our collective faith and Strong ties to the Reformed Tradition,” McCutney said.

The proposed revisions to the Statement of Purpose do not radically alter the document. Rather, the Trustees wanted to clarify the College’s relationship to the Presbyterian Church.

Rev. Art Ross ’65, a trustee who sat on the Ad Hoc Committee said, “One of the principles of the Reformed Tradition is as time goes by one gets a clearer view. No statement will always be final. It will always be subject to being reformed . . . I think the new Statement of Purpose sharpens our relationship to the Church and the makes the language a little clearer.”

After revising and reexamining the Statement of Purpose, the Committee decided that “to require all Trustees to have such [Christian] membership is not consistent with the Statement of Purpose of the Reformed Tradition of Christian faith.”

The Committee specifically pointed out that “these recommendations were not made in the first instance as a matter of equity, or in an effort to homogenize Davidson into a place that looks more like other colleges. Rather, the basis for our proposals was a theological one, relying on the tenets of our faith as the foundation for our suggestions.”

Vagt emphasized that the decision was based on their theological understanding of the Reformed Tradition.
“While the issue of equity with respect to alumni being able to serve is important, and, while one might assume that this significant change in policy makes Davidson appear more welcoming, the primary basis for the Committee’s recommendations is that they are a better reflection of the theological foundation of Davidson,” Vagt said.

Rogers also stressed the theological reasoning for this decision.

“This recommendation grew out of our committee’s conversations about what expresses the reformed tradition. This is not a retreat or denial from the Reformed Tradition,” he said.

The final recommendation from the committee asked for the Board’s support in creating an endowed chair in Reformed Theology.

“The Trustee issue was not an isolated issue but was part of a wider discussion that included not only attention to the Statement of Purpose but also to the questions of the academic program, that is the teaching of Reformed Theology in the Department of Religion,” said Rogers.

For this reason, the committee felt it important to emphasize the College’s historic ties to the Reformed Church and allow for the instruction of Reformed theology at Davidson.

“As an expression of the importance of the intellectual piece of the historic ties with this faith tradition, the Committee challenged the Board to sponsor a person who would be able to instruct in this area,” said Vagt.

Until 1998, there had been a professor specializing in Reformed Theology in the Religion Department. However, since his departure, there has been no specialist in Reformed theology at Davidson.

The committee’s proposal will most likely be voted on at the Trustees’ next meeting early next semester.

Although there is no way to know exactly how the Trustees will vote, there did seem to be positive feelings from most members of the Board.

“[The proposal] was very well received,” said Rogers. “We want to have some more discussion, but I think it’s just a matter of tweaking it some.”

Analyzing the recommendations

According to College Chaplain Rob Spach ’84, the proposed changes are clearly in line with Davidson’s Reformed heritage.

“The Reformed tradition believes that we are all finite and we are limited by our specific context . . . this means we ought to remain open to people of other traditions because it is possible that we can move closer to a fuller understanding of truth through our interactions,” said Spach.

Spach believes that it is precisely because of our Reformed tradition, not in spite of it, that this change was possible.

“One of my concerns when I came here in ’93 was that we look at our religious tradition in a way that is forward looking without letting go of where we come from,” he said. “This decision is an expression of that forward looking tradition.”

In addition to these recommendations being in line with the College’s Reformed heritage, many believe that students should pay careful attention to this decision.
Spach said the decision is important because, "as students you don't know if you will someday want to be a trustee and the recommendations make that a possibility for any student."

McCartney agreed, saying, "Under the bylaws as interpreted when I was a student, I would not have been eligible to serve as a trustee. It didn't seem very relevant to me at the time, but I'm glad there has been a change."

Vagt also felt this recommendation is important for current students to understand.

When asked what the proposal meant for non-Christian students at Davidson Vagt said, "What I hope this proposal does not say is that they [non-Christians] have been deemed lesser people prior to its passage. What I hope it does say is that this institution respects them for their own faith traditions and trusts them to honor the faith tradition on which this institution was founded."
Chandler Award Entry

Trustees' Newly Endowed Chair Causes Faculty Concern
Religion Department Seeks Active Role in Hiring of New Professor
March 13, 2005

The recent decision of the Board of Trustees to create an endowed chair in Reformed theology in the Religion Department has caused several faculty members to express concern about both the process and the timing of this move.

"This decision happened largely independently of us, and while no department completely controls its own destiny, I was concerned about the way we as a department would participate," said Dr. Karl Plank, Chair of the Religion Department.

Others in the department expressed similar concerns.

"When I first learned in The Davidsonian that this was going to happen I felt that our department had just taken something of a sucker punch," said Religion Professor Trent Foley. "Procedurally it was done in a way that dishonors the Religion Department."

Religion profs address issues with administrators

The trustees' decision to create an endowed chair in Reformed theology was made at the same time that the trustees opened up the board to non-Christians and revised the College’s Statement of Purpose in order to reemphasize Davidson’s ongoing relationship to the Reformed tradition.

Following the announcement of the new chair, Plank contacted President Bobby Vagt and Dean of Faculty Clark Ross and requested that they meet with the members of his department to discuss their concerns about the new chair.

Among those concerns were the facts that the department had not been consulted about this decision, that the Religion Department already has several specialists in theology while lacking specialists in other areas, and that this additional chair might make it hard for the department to grow in the future.

President Vagt was contacted for this article but refused to comment, saying, "It is my policy not to talk about meetings with departments."

Ross did say that he recognizes the potential difficulties of establishing a new chair and believes that the meeting helped provide some context to the decision.

"Departments should have a sensitivity to theses issues, so I take no offense that they asked questions about the timing," Ross said.

Within the Religion Department itself, reaction to the meeting was mixed.

“There was a gaining of mutual understanding of the two views and I got the sense that we said what can be said and that we were understood,” Plank said.

Others still expressed disappointment after the meeting.

“I think the president tried to convince us that in the discussion the trustees had there was no perception that the religion department was bad, which in some ways is comforting,” Foley said. “But I felt like you can either be thought badly of or you can not be thought of at all and both can be equally hurtful, and it seems clear to me that the latter was what occurred here.”

The faculty did agree that creating such a chair might be appropriate for a school such as Davidson, but they said that the timing for such a chair is wrong.
"Creating a chair in Reformed theology isn't bad but it has to do with the timing," said Foley. "To add another position of theology at this time gives us too much of one thing, namely Christian thought, and makes us short on others."

Ross, however, believes that sometimes such timing issues are hard to avoid.

"There is always the possibility of an issue associated with the timing of a proposal to establish a chair," said Ross. "Donors can well approach the College before we have discussed a prospect with a department."

Implications for future growth

The move to create an endowed chair in Reformed theology raises several questions as to how the Religion Department will be able to grow in the future.

This new chair is the second chair added to the Religion Department in recent years that was not the result of a formal request from the department.

The last chair added to the department was the Rolston chair in science and religion, which was created after a donation was made specifically to endow an expert in that area.

According to Plank, for both the new chair in Reformed theology and the Rolston chair in science and religion, the Religion Department had little or no say in what areas the new faculty members would teach.

The department was able to write the advertisement and chose the finalists for the Rolston professorship within the context of the chair's purpose, however.

With two new faculty members added to the Religion Department in such a short amount of time, there is a concern within the department that they will not be able to offer new courses in areas where they currently lack expertise, such as Islam.

Vagt and Ross did try to assuage concerns at the meeting that these new chairs would not affect the department's ability to grow in the future.

"If there is a clear deficiency curricularly within the offerings in religion and we have the funds to address the issue, we will remedy such a situation," Ross said.

Some faculty remain skeptical of that claim, however.

"While the President and the Dean tried to assure us that this decision would not affect our department's expansion in directions of our own choosing, I do think it will be hard for us to make a fair case for such expansion if there are other departments that have classrooms consistently more packed than ours," Foley said.

Going forward

Despite the concerns within the department, Plank feels it is important to try and work with the administration and the trustees as much as possible to ensure that whoever is chosen for the position will be the best fit for the department.

Among the best ways Plank sees to ensure that both the College and the department benefit from the new chair is to have the department play an active role in the search for the new faculty member.

"The president assured us that the process would be one of integrity and that we would have a voice in the matter," Plank said. "We will try and find someone whose theological interests don't overlap too much with the existing department."
Chandler Award Entry

Belk, Smith Resign from Board
Actions Follow in Wake of Change in Trustee Religion Requirement
April 13, 2005

John Belk '43 and Steve B. Smith '66 both resigned in late March in protest of the Board of Trustees’ recent change allowing non-Christians on the board.
Belk and Smith were two of the five members of the board to vote against the proposed changes, while 31 members supported the changes.
"We regret [their resignations] a great deal," said President Vagt. "We will miss their guidance and counsel."

John McCartney '74, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, echoed Vagt’s sentiments about Belk, saying, "John Belk and his family have been magnificent supporters and benefactors, and I understand and respect his disagreement and we continue to be appreciative of everything he’s done."

While both resigned in protest, each man had a slightly different reason.
Belk’s resignation was largely the result of his disagreement with the board’s decision.
"I was against the change and I got voted down," Belk said. "I think Davidson ought to remain a Christian school governed by Christians."

Smith’s resignation was based mostly on his objections to the process by which this change came about.
"My view of the process was it was basically someone’s personal agenda to get this rule changed, and the process was orchestrated to get that end," he said.

The specific vote included allowing up to 20 percent of the board to be composed of non-Christians, revising the College’s Statement of Purpose in order to reinforce Davidson’s commitment to its Reformed heritage and the addition of an endowed chair specializing in Reformed theology.

Disagreement over the change
Belk’s resignation centered on his fundamental belief that, as a Christian college, Davidson should be completely governed by Christian individuals.
"If the trustees are not all Christian, then it weakens the school and takes away what makes us unique," he said.

Smith was not completely opposed to allowing non-Christians on the board, saying that he would not be opposed to allowing non-Christian alumni serve on the board.
He was, however, opposed to the board’s reasoning that allowing non-Christians on the board was in line with Davidson’s Presbyterian heritage.
"It just doesn’t make sense to me how opening the board to non-Christians doesn’t weaken our traditions," said Smith. "Trying to couch this in the Reformed tradition is very insulting to me."

Many other trustees did accept the argument that allowing non-Christians on the board did not lessen Davidson’s Christian heritage.
Rev. John Rogers '63, a Presbyterian minister and trustee who had originally voiced concern about opening the board to non-Christians, voted in support of the change.

"I don't think Davidson has acted in a way to distance itself from its Christian commitment at all," said Rogers. "This is consistent with our Reformed tradition and shows a confident, critical openness to other perspectives."

Rogers did, however, accept that there could be significant disagreement over such complex theological issues.

"I don't think there was a right side and a wrong side in this issue," he said. "This is a matter about which people of good faith can disagree."

Stacking the deck?

Smith believes that the process of this change was biased in favor of getting rid of the Christian requirement for trustees.

Specifically, Smith pointed to the fact that Roy Davis '55, the trustee who chairs the standing Committee on Campus and Religious Life and who had been opposed to changing the requirement, was not appointed as part of the ad-hoc committee that ultimately recommended getting rid of the requirement.

"It seems obvious that you would include Davis since he's the chairman of the standing committee, but he was not invited to join," said Smith.

McCartney, who appointed the members of the ad-hoc committee, said there was no deliberate attempt to bias the committee's ultimate recommendation by excluding Davis or through any other means.

"I, by no means, intended to snub Roy Davis," McCartney said. "I did specifically want the trustees who are currently pastors to serve on that committee, and both John Rogers and Art Ross agreed. Other than that I just wanted to ensure there was adequate representation from alumni-elected trustees and alumni ex-officio trustees."

Davis, who ultimately was one of the five trustees to vote against the change, did not in any way feel he was deliberately excluded from the process or that the selection of the committee was biased.

"When this issue came up John [McCartney] told me that he had considered asking me if I would serve, but knowing I had recently served on two other ad-hoc committees he felt I had done enough service on ad-hoc committees," Davis said. "I am convinced that there was no ulterior motive by my not being asked to serve on the committee."

Alumni letters

Smith's other objection to the process centered around what he felt was the inadequate attention paid to alumni responses to the recommended changes prior to the trustees' vote.

Following the ad hoc committee's recommendation that the Christian requirement for trustees be changed, the Alumni Association sent out a packet to all 17,000 Davidson alumni in December, informing them of the proposed changes and asking for their input.

"The cover letter sent to alumni was very vague about what was being proposed," said Smith. "You had to either look at attachments or go to a website. It was not clear from the cover letter that the proposal was to change the trustee religion requirement."
The cover letter sent to the alumni said, "The Trustees are considering a series of recommendations, which were placed before them at their October meeting, with respect to the requirements for being a Trustee."

The cover letter did not specifically mention that the requirement under consideration was the requirement that all trustees be Christian; however, the attachments included in the packet did include the full proposal by the board.

In response to the packets sent out to the alumni, the President’s office received 122 written responses prior to the trustees’ vote on the proposal at their February meeting.

Smith said that he was never given the opportunity to read those letters carefully before he was asked to vote, and he believes that those letters were deliberately withheld from the board.

"I was left with the distinct feeling that some people didn’t want these letters to be seen," Smith said.

McCartney defended his decision not to distribute the letters to all members of the Board prior to their vote.

"The ad-hoc committee had reported to the trustees on the number of letters we received and how many seemed pro or con or neutral," McCartney said. "It was my assessment, in concurrence with the chair of the ad-hoc committee, that the trustees had adequate information on which to make their decision and did not need to receive every letter."

President Vagt agreed with McCartney’s reasoning saying, "All of the letters were seen by some trustees so that when the trustees acted they felt they were conversant with all the issues."

**Future implications**

Despite their resignations, both Belk and Smith’s feelings towards Davidson as an institution and towards its student body have not faltered.

"I’m still in favor of the students and my money will continue to go towards the student body, but not towards other causes," said Belk in continuing his commitment to the Belk Scholars program, which, with the class of 2009, now offers ten comprehensive scholarships to Davidson College.

Smith voiced his support for the institution, but said he cannot support the current administration.

"The school transcends the current leadership of the school, but I can’t abide by a flawed process on something this important," he said.

McCartney acknowledged that with any significant decision there is the potential for strong disagreement, regardless of what the Board decides.

"This issue and the outcome represents a sign of change for Davidson and anytime there is significant change there is the risk of disagreement," said McCartney.

"The result that a number of our alumni don’t agree with the decision was expected and understandable. I think people would have been disappointed regardless of what decision was made."